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ABSTRACT

Seven brief presentations discuss social attitudes toward divorce and the experiences and problems families face after divorce. Introductory remarks indicate (1) the extent to which divorced parents are denied consistent and positive support from legal and counseling institutions, schools and the work-place, and (2) the archaic institutionalized attitudes toward divorced parents which impair adjustment for the families. The first presentation discusses experiences faced by single parents in coming to terms with their past and managing the present. Subsequently, experiences of mothers without custody of their children are reported and reflected upon. Problems of adjustment of women who have chosen to live separately from their children are also discussed. The following presentation reports on the visiting role experienced by men who wish to remain engaged in the lives of their children. The next topic describes the family forum--a form of therapy for families of divorce. Ways in which the therapist helps to create a setting safe for productive discussion are indicated. Next, several aspects of joint custody are discussed and ways of reducing parental conflict are indicated. The final presentation explores the phenomenon of minifamilies within the stepfamily. (Author/RH)

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PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE

Papers from a 1980 Conference for Professionals

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Richard Chasin

Traditional attitudes embedded in legal and counseling institutions often render those institutions unresponsive to the needs of families of divorce. People in any crisis are generally receptive to unfamiliar and creative resolutions of their dilemmas. However, the institutions which impact on families in divorce do not take advantage of this malleability. They tend to resort to standard and well-worn paths and rarely offer original solutions which might better meet the particular needs of each family.

In general, families in the divorce process are deeply pained and at high risk. What they need is a great deal of support and far-sighted, individualized advice from the institutions to which they turn. What they too often get from those institutions is either withdrawal of support or short-sighted, stereotyped advice and management.

For example, with respect to the period of separation and early divorce, all members of a family tend to feel vulnerable and guilty. What they need is protection from an atmosphere of uncontrolled hostility and thoughtless, destructive action. What they often get from mental health professionals (and from well-meaning friends) is encouragement to express openly their pent-up rage. They may be told that it is good for them to "get the anger off their chests," and to "tell the other how they really feel" even when such outbursts of fury have little effect on parents and children other than to aggravate hostilities, terror, and guilt. Ventilation of rage may provide short range

release of tension but it fosters long-range hurt feeling and distrust.

With respect to the process of negotiating a divorce, parents often display an inability to communicate with each other in a co-operative and constructive fashion. In addition, negotiations are hampered by a tendency for the couple to envision the future as nothing but a simple extension of the miserable experiences they have been having in and around the time of splitting up. From their squabble there emerges an agreement which may contain numerous provisions covering the minute issues of the moment and relatively few statements which indicate how they will handle the major unforeseeable situations which will confront them in the future. The quarrelsome negotiation process leaves them with the precedent of a disputatious process for settling differences and a piece of paper of limited value for the long range. What the divorcing couple needs is to appreciate that the hurts of today will tend to fade and be replaced by tomorrow's ordinary problems of childrearing. They need to take the long view and see that it is more important for them to strive for a co-operative process between them now and in the future than it is for them to fight tooth-and-nail to achieve an agreement which does little more than get them through the divorce. What they get are attorneys who are skilled in using an adversarial approach to divorce settlements. The grueling negotiation experience has a more lasting impact on the future of the divorce than the precise wording of the final decree. Ten years later, few divorced couples will remember the visitation details in the decree but practically all of them will recall how much fear and distrust they learned in the process of arriving at the decree whether its terms were negotiated out of court or imposed by the court. The situation is many times worse when there is custody litigation. Here the impact of the adversarial process usually does far greater damage than the ultimate order of the court does good.

With respect to marriage counseling, the couple is in far greater need

when they have made a decision to divorce than when they are working toward improving their marriage. What they need from their counselor (or therapist) is support and guidance to survive as individuals and to preserve and improve whatever capacity they have to form an effective co-parenting relationship after the marriage is over. What they often get is abandonment by their marital counselor. When a couple decides to divorce, the counselor often drops the case and may turn over each client to separate counselors who give aid and comfort to each spouse but who often do not focus their efforts on helping the couple to establish a good co-parenting team.

It is not only the legal and counseling professions which have attitudes and practices which often do not meet the needs of parents and children of divorce. Educational institutions and the work-place also have institutionalized attitudes which do not make any easier the problem of parenting after divorce. Schools sometimes treat non-custodial parents as though they are not parents at all. Employers resist flexible time arrangements which allow divorced couples to meet their children's needs for care by both parents.

As we listen to further talks and discussions in this conference we will be aware continuously of how archaic attitudes which are embedded in social institutions hamper the needs of divorced parents and their children.

Some of these attitudes are:

1. Good parenting can only be done by a mother and father who are married;
2. when parents get divorced, one or both is somehow defective or blameworthy;
3. even if they seem to have competence and integrity, the divorce proves that they cannot co-operate with each other on any matter, particularly about their children's needs;
4. the children are precious property and should be awarded to the better parent for custody;
5. the mother is the better parent (especially of young children) because women innately know better how to nurture;
6. compared with women, men are less able and less interested in nurturing but they have more valuable skills than women, to wit, competence in the work place;

7. making money is the male's best contribution to his child;
8. if he pays child support he earns the right to visit his beneficiary; and
9. men who wish to nurture and women who prefer to work outside the home are somehow weird and/or are not committed either to career or children.

These attitudes are institutionalized. Individuals representing social institutions will often consciously disavow these attitudes but nonetheless many of their actions will be guided by them. We must be alert to how such attitudes invisibly shape the practices in our society which make it difficult for divorced couples to lead fuller lives and to be better parents for their children.

THE SINGLE PARENT EXPERIENCE

Robert Weiss

I want to talk, as a research sociologist, to an audience of people who are counselors and therapists about ways I think you can be helpful to single parents. I think, in working with single parents, you'll encounter two sets of issues. The first set has to do with their coming to terms with their past, with a marriage that failed and a separation that was almost inescapably unpleasant. The second set of issues has to do with their managing the present, the present that is in some ways rewarding, in many ways very difficult.

One of the things we are learning in our research group, primarily from work with widows and widowers, is how people go about dealing with a difficult past, and especially the problems that can arise when there are issues of ambivalence associated with that past. It seems to us that those people who do best, in terms of being most able to go on to new lives with potential for new gratification, with direction, with coherence, are those who have adequately come to terms with their old lives. The key to coming to terms with an old life is a phrase used by many widows and widowers who have done it: "You don't get over it. You get used to it."

What that means is that recovery from trauma, of which marital separation is one form, does not take the form of going back to being the person you were before the trauma occurred. It is not like recovery from the common cold. Rather, recovery from trauma takes the form of becoming a person who is different because of it and who acknowledges that difference. It means accepting all the

things that did happen, including what the spouse did and what you did, and the things you never should have done and would like to imagine you hadn't done, all the crazinesses that are associated with marital breakup, all the things about which you would like to say, "Well, that wasn't really me." It means acknowledging those and making them a part of your real past. It means acknowledging, as part of who you are now, that you have feelings of many kinds, hurts and longings, regrets, remorse, perhaps some warmth towards the other partner too, and that these feelings are ongoing, continuing, a part of your present functioning. "Getting used to it" in short means accepting that it happened and accepting that you're now different in your feelings and your functioning because of it.

How can a professional help in this process? First, by recognizing that individuals who are obsessing about the past and thinking about how it could have been different and going over again and again how it actually happened are engaged in an attempt to integrate that past. Sometimes it's necessary in order for that process to be successful, but sometimes people can get stuck in the process, and find some pieces of it that they just can't take in. There it can be helpful to be accepting as a professional, to offer as a professional acknowledgement -- "Yes, that did happen" -- to give support, to give respect, even when hearing the most outlandish events and behaviors, and then to redirect people's attention to their current lives and their hopes and plans.

It can also be extremely helpful, for people who are trying to get used to it, for them to be able to participate with others who are in the same boat, because others in the same boat help establish "Yes, you're different now; here's who you are and that's all right." People who have been through trauma ordinarily find for a time that their former friends no longer have relevance, because their former friends don't share that experience with them. They need

a new community, temporarily, of people who do share that experience, who have been through it.

So much for helping people deal with the past. What of the present? There are issues having to do with arranging the structure of life, obtaining the needed income, and single parents, much, much more often than married parents, worry about money, both not having enough and not having anybody else to rely on to help them provide it. They worry about obtaining housing that will work for the children and for themselves and be affordable to boot, about getting work not too far from home, preferably with adequate pay, with flexible hours and a boss who won't mind if they take off if one of the kids is ill. They worry about having a job that has access to a telephone so that they can check on the kids and maintain some sort of linkage with them when the kids come home early from school, even if it means putting up with a child who just calls in to say, "Mom, Johnny's looking at me."

They worry about child care. They worry about what all this is going to be doing to the kids. Once these realities are taken care of, there's the issue of organizing the household, of getting the kids to help, assigning responsibilities, arbitrating the children's protests: "How come I have to do so much?" And part of that is cherishing the increased closeness and tolerating the increased level of negotiations with children who feel, maybe justifiably, that since they have new responsibilities, they have new rights, too.

Then there are the relationships with the children, some of whom may be experiencing the special uncertainties and tensions that come from having parents living in different homes, parents who are covert or open antagonists. For how can you be entirely identified with each of your parents if your parents are hostile to each other? And so the single parent learns to be tactful, to permit, maybe even foster, children's relationships with the other parent, to hold back from asking that question the parent wants to ask, respecting the children's

privacy, hiding the parent's own feeling of anger, bitterness, disdain. And then there's the parent's relationship with the other parent, no longer a member of the same household, but still affecting it, an unsettling voice on the telephone, a Sunday visitor whose appearance excites the children and upsets the parent, a partner in the children's support, but a partner in no other way, maybe make-pretend helpful, but in fact invasive, an irritant, a pain, and yet inescapable.

With all this, the single parent, like all of us, needs to maintain links to community, to friends, kin, neighbors, among whom the single parent has an assured place, people who provide favors and information and company and fun. But the single parent has more need than the rest of us for community just because, unlike the married, there is no fellow adult in the household to talk with, to do things with, to ask for help. Unlike the single who doesn't have children, the single parent very often needs, not only company, but also help, favors. But the working single parent has so little time. And so keeping in touch is left for phone calls in the evening, or weekend visits, or it is just let go.

The single parent, like other single people, is vulnerable to loneliness, despite the presence of the children, who are fine, but they are not adults. Indeed, beginning to build the emotional ties with children that are adequate to fend off loneliness can be bad for the children in that it makes it more difficult for the children to move on to independence. So the single parent has to use some of the time and energy that's left over for finding someone, for establishing some sort of intimacy. And this means dating, and dating is just one more thing to do, and yes, it's a welcome interruption of routine, it's fun, it's excitement, but it's one more thing taking the parent away from the children, and somehow it's one more thing to be made all right with the children. Above all the single parent is constantly vulnerable to overload,

to having too much to do, so that something important is always being let slide, the house a mess, nothing for dinner, the kids demanding attention, and no time to look after oneself. As if this were not enough, there's a constant call from the children for attention and emotional energy, so that a new kind of overload develops, an overload on one's emotional capacities, with one child after another saying, "Look at me," "Give me some attention, give me some nurturance." And with this there's a third kind of overload. There's too much responsibility, unending responsibility, responsibility for small things, like what time should bedtime be; responsibility for bigger things, like is it okay for this child to go to a boy/girl party; responsibility for everything; and it's not even possible to share the responsibility with the kids and get away with it, because doing that is a responsibility, too.

How can professionals work with all this? First, recognize the importance of simply understanding, of simply being able to say, "Yes, that's what it's like to be a single parent, and you're doing the best you can. That's what the situation's like; it's what single parents do." Second, recognize the importance of respecting the single parent and the way the single parent is operating. Respect can be communicated in so many ways. It can be communicated simply by your way of listening. It can be communicated by humor, by being able to share a kind of amusement at how much there is to do and how little of it can be done. Respect from a professional contributes to self-esteem, and self-esteem means more energy for making things work, less need to be worried about self. Support and guidance can be helpful, because people suffering overload sometimes just run out of gas. They want to throw up their hands; they want to quit; they want to say, "I can't do it," and then it's terribly important for there to be an ally. We talked with some single parents who had access to a social worker, a solid, imperturbable man, whom they could call when things got too much. He would talk with them for five minutes, right then; he wouldn't call them back,

no matter who was in his office, and he'd say, "Take it easy, walk around the block, send the kids out to play." He'd say, "Do something," and then if he felt it was important he'd make an appointment with them later. But the point is that it was terribly important for them to hear that voice that said, "You'll manage, and in a way we're in it together. You can count on me. You don't have to hit the kids, you don't have to scream, you don't have to walk out and say, 'I'm never coming back.' You'll get through this." That's support.

Groups are a little less important, I think, for the veteran parent than they are for the person who's dealing with problems of the past and who's trying to establish a new identity. But groups can offer some information, some support, some sense of community.

Let me summarize briefly. Here are some suggestions for working with single parents. Offer understanding. Offer respect. Focus with them on the positive, as a contribution to their maintaining their morale. Provide support, and communicate that you're in it with them. Where appropriate, offer guidance, absolutely straightforward advice: "Here's the way to deal with this." And there's one other thing I haven't mentioned that can be important: know the social resources, the other facilities in the community that can be helpful, the peer groups, the child care arrangements, the opportunities for income support, and how your client can find them, because in our attention to morale, we shouldn't entirely neglect the importance of reality.

MOTHERS WITHOUT CUSTODY

Mary Johnson

> At work or at a party I never talk about my kids. Nobody brings up the subject if you don't bring it up first. It's a silent wall. People don't know what to say. They assume I'm an unfit mother since that's the way custody laws used to read. If people find out I chose to leave the boys at home with their father they are astonished and very often there is a judgement against me which I can read in their eyes.

In the course of our work at the Divorce Center we had met several women who did not have custody of their children. Whether they came to the lectures, to the support groups or as clients it was clear that they felt lonely and isolated. Last spring I ran a support group for several of these women. Although we talked with only a small sample, about twenty people, it was clear that their problems were unique and the very complexities of their situations made it hard for them to reach out to other people and share their difficulties and their strengths. Most of the personal quotes in this paper come from people in that group.

Why is it hard for women to live away from their children? Is it harder than it is for men? Mothers, particularly with small children at home, or sick children, have all known the urge to hand them over to someone else and get out and away, to think of themselves for a change. But usually they don't, because they're responsible mothers. Even if they work, have a husband who helps a lot, or arrange for day care, they still know that making these arrangements and all the hours in between are their responsibility; they've known that's a woman's job ever since they were children. They believe it's a worthwhile and rewarding

role, even if it's tedious from time to time. They love those kids, their identity is wrapped up in them; children give their lives an irreplaceable kind of meaning.

That's how we look at motherhood. We're shocked, even horrified, to hear of mothers who have left their kids. We're shocked because those ties and the responsibilities they entail are an integral part of our definition of "woman" and we can't imagine how anyone could break them. This shock and incredulity sometimes keep us from understanding other people's lives so that just when mothers who have given up custody need our support the most they find that even their close friends, relatives and professionals can't or won't help them, or sometimes even talk to them.

Men know they can have children and a career. From the time they're little boys they feel a responsibility to themselves to develop a productive and self-fulfilling professional life. Women don't know they can have both. It looks more possible than it used to, but it's by no means clear. Someone has to raise those kids.

We feel excited when we hear, as we have this morning, that fathers can be nurturant, can be really good single parents to their kids. We have ideas about what it means to be a good father in a nuclear family. Ted Kramer, in the film Kramer vs. Kramer, and the fathers Harry Keshet (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1980) has described tell us that men who have chosen or been forced to make the sacrifices and adjustments in their lives to give them the time and space to take over as the principal parent, have expanded themselves personally to become fuller human beings with a new rich dimension to their lives they had not dreamed existed for them.

But how do we feel about a woman who has allowed a man to assume this rich and rewarding new role? Do we know right away that she has made big sacrifices too? Do we realize that every day she has to redefine what it means to be a

mother? Do we think how she must feel when the TV, her friends and family, society at large and even her own inner wisdom tell her that a mother's first and most important job is to be there for her children? Well, we may know it's hard if we really think about it, but too often we assume, somehow, that she's selfish; that she has abandoned her kids. We don't realize that she might be living right down the street from her family, or in the next town, still a very caring mother.

> I haven't abandoned her. I see her every week. I talk to her every night. That's what happens in a divorced situation; the family takes a new shape and dimension. I'm no longer a wife, but we're still both parents. Sometimes I get jealous, I miss the funny little times, but she seems happy.

How do some women have the courage to make this tough and lonely decision? Harry Keshet has studied one hundred and twenty-seven fathers (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1980), and estimates have been made that there are about a million men in this country who have major responsibility for the care of their children. Except for the widowers, in each case there is a woman out there who is living without her kids. Sometimes, of course, the children were "dumped" because of a mother's ill health or lack of responsibility. At some other times the choice was made fairly rationally by both parents, as Susan and her husband managed when they were divorced and she moved from the suburbs to center city:

> I knew I had to leave the marriage. I didn't know what lay ahead for me and recognizing that, we had to start to think about what was best for our daughter. We came to the decision to leave her in the environment with which she was familiar and in an emotional environment that has remained a good one. She has a good father, an excellent provider both emotionally and physically. It's hard enough to have a child's life upset by divorce, but to have her whole life turned upside down the way mine was when I moved would not have been a good thing to do to my child.

Susan felt she was leaving the child with the parent better equipped to care of her. But for many mothers that isn't true. Sometimes a father won't go. Perhaps it's the mother, alone, who feels that drowning feeling, that need

for more personal space, and she has to get out. Because it is still so hard for a woman to leave, sometimes she just can't work it out amicably and instead leaves precipitously, so that father and children feel abandoned.

Marianne, outwardly a good mother and active wife of a community leader, could not get her husband to hear her cries for help. She finally left home very suddenly, leaving children and husband to cope as best they could. Now, two years later, as she looks back:

> It took me a year to admit it, but now I know that I always wanted my children with me; I still want them; I miss them every day. Although I see them regularly, every other weekend, I worry about things like their clothes, haircuts and visits to the dentist. We have a good, open relationship now. But they're almost adolescents; will they still be willing to visit and talk with me the way they do now when they get more independent and busy with their activities and friends?
>
> I know, too, that their father will never give them up. His business has not been too successful and they are a real anchor and identity for him. For myself, I have found a wonderful job in which I'm growing every day. I've started a Masters Program, too. I know I've developed in a way I couldn't have in that marriage.
>
> I've learned by a slow and painful process to stand on my own feet and to trust my own judgment. I know I can rely on me. I used to have to sound out everything with my husband, but he wasn't able to support my gropings toward independence. I was much too vulnerable to his criticism.
>
> For me, being a wife and a mother just wasn't enough. I wanted it all. If I could have the kids tomorrow that would be fine. If not, now, that's fine also. That doesn't mean I don't want them. I want it all!

Still other times however, there is a situation like Pat's. We would hardly call it a choice:

> I had to leave for my own physical safety. My husband was an alcoholic and physically abusive to me. I weighed over 200 pounds and had terrible headaches and was at the end of my ability to cope. I could see that refereeing our fights was tearing our teenage boys to pieces.
>
> I wanted them to come with me, but they chose to remain

with their father in their own home and school community. He was not abusive to them. Now he has to work and has to feed them. But they are in the home of a single parent who is an alcoholic. Their future may be shortchanged. One, who was an excellent student, flunked three subjects last year. I could feel good, perhaps, if he was a super dad, but he's not.

The hardest thing for me has been establishing a new relationship with the boys, because they did feel that I had abandoned them, even though I had tried hard to get them to come with me. I still think of them every day, think about what they're doing, but in spite of my efforts things happen which widen the gap. Now when I look at the old pictures it's beginning to feel like that's the family of another woman. I know it's my family my sons, my home, but it's much more distant.

Since I left home I've lost nearly a hundred pounds, my headaches are gone and I feel like a human being for the first time in years. It hurts, the feeling of loss and separation from my children; maybe I won't get over it. Perhaps I'll just have to learn to live with it. I've come a long way without them! Perhaps they'll understand some day.

Women who have given up custody of their children have had to cope with a lot of anger. The anger may be directed at life, or their husbands, or themselves for being forced into a position where they had to make that difficult decision. That anger might perhaps have been translated, now into hurt, or guilt, or sadness, but no matter how it is expressed, or what the target, these women feel a lot of pain. For some the only way to cope is to swallow all that anger and hurt and build a life wholly in the world of work and new friends, never mentioning the children and perhaps never seeing them because it is too painful and complicated. If they come at all to a support group like ours they might come only once, because they weren't ready to stir up and relive all that anger, or perhaps to acknowledge that it was there at all.

Others can't live without coping with that pain. Through personal therapy, a support group like ours or an organization like Respond, for battered women, or perhaps all three, women can start on the long haul of defining themselves as a person with integrity and as a caring and responsible mother.

I wish I could say "with the help of supportive family and friends." Unfortunately many relatives and friends do not understand. Lawyers and the legal system, teachers and the school systems, even therapists, often add to the list of unsympathetic people. Sadly, as soon as many people find out that a mother is not living with her kids, they abandon her without showing their respect and care by finding out directly from her what is happening.

How can friends and professionals fit in most helpfully? First, of course, is to be there with positive support remembering that the decision to leave her children is a very difficult one for a woman to make; it is not an easy way out.

Overall, the biggest question is how can she see herself as a mother? There are no good role models. Instead the images of motherhood and family, the way things are supposed to be, have to be faced and understood as unrealistic; new definitions of mother and woman must be built in their places. Once visiting schedules are worked out, worry about their children's daily lives between visits and the visits themselves can bring problems. When she works hard all week trying to establish a new life in the world, and then puts so much hope and energy into weekend time with the children, it's a real blow when discipline problems take away so much of the pleasure. Supportive friends and professionals do a lot by listening and helping women to acknowledge their difficulties, to devise new patterns of parenting, and helping them to remember they need only be normal, not supermoms.

One of the hardest problems is dealing with friends and relatives who feel that leaving the children was the wrong thing. It is hard not to be defensive and easily upset, especially at the beginning before a mother really knows how things will work out. It can be a real boost to have someone to help figure out ways to respond to an unsympathetic questioner, because the other, real problems of coping are so overwhelming - the loss of the everyday presence of her children and her home and the loneliness when before she had been needed by

others.

Recent studies by Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1979) and Nancy Chodorow (Chodorow, 1979) indicate that the very process of separation and individuation is threatening to female gender identity. Femininity is defined through attachment. Women know themselves and are known through their relationships to others. Women are still far from equal to men in job opportunities, pay, and many other areas. However, studies like Gilligan's and Chodorow's indicate that women's ability to feel good about pushing their own self-development is not just a matter of rights, laws and opportunities. It goes much deeper to their socialization as girls from the moment they are born. For this reason it is extraordinarily difficult for women to be able to recognize their own self growth as a responsibility which has the same dignity for them as it does for their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons.

In a paper given at Wheelock last spring, Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1980) said that her research showed that men learn to speak in terms of justice, fairness and rights, while women use the language of caring, connectedness, and responsibility. "Men and women typically bring different conceptions of self and morality to the world they jointly inhabit." If we fear that, when the eighties herald the transit of men and women into each other's domain, it will be at the price of relationship and the care of children, perhaps we need to look at "what the women are doing and hear what they are saying with sympathy rather than scorn."

Traditionally, "morality for women consists in caring for others so that the woman who acts on her own behalf is judged selfish and is socially at risk." Looking carefully at Mrs. Kramer in the film, Kramer vs. Kramer, Gilligan shows Mrs. Kramer's dilemma not as "a choice of self vs. other, but rather a problem of how to act responsibly when there is no way of caring that does not cause hurt." The film's "power lies in depicting the education of both Kramers

toward the ability to see the needs of their child and to respond to those needs with generosity and care." (Gilligan, 1980).

Nancy Chodorow believes that "Women's univeral mothering role has effects both on the development of masculine and feminine personality and on the relative status of the sexes." (Chodorow, 1974). The fact that women are children's primary caretakers the world over has a lot to do with how we view ourselves and others, particularly in our different roles as men and women. She suggests social arrangements that could contribute to social equality between men and women. "Boys need to grow up around men who take a major role in child care, and girls around women, who, in addition to their child care responsibilities, have a valued role and recognized spheres of legitimate control. These arrangements could help to ensure that children of both sexes develop a sufficiently individuated and strong sense of self," as well as a healthy relatedness to others. (Chodorow, 1974 p. 66)

As far as I know there have been few, if any, studies of mothers living separately from their children and very little written which describes their situation with sympathy and understanding. One exception was an article in Parade Magazine last February by Rita Rooney, "When Dad Is Given Custody." She describes several situations where, although mothers might have legal custody, the children were living with their fathers, relations between the parents were amicable and the arrangements were voluntary. There were others, too, sometimes not so amicable, where fathers had custody.

The women in our support group were all looking for some space for themselves. They often did not know what that meant when they made the move out from their families. In some cases they only knew that the nurturant role was not for them on a fulltime basis, or, perhaps, that it was not enough. Because their marriages had not worked out, they had to leave home to gain the space they needed to be able to attend to their own inner voices. Once they got out,

away from a relationship in which they could not grow, they found that they had to depend on themselves, had to develop a sense of wholeness apart from other people. They've gone back to school, taken on new jobs, grown into new responsibilities in the world of work that they had not known were possible for them.

For a visiting parent, particularly a mother, one of the hardest tasks is to affirm to their children that the caring is still there. This no longer needs to be a self sacrificial caring as it might have been if she had stayed at home, but a new found ability to reach out and help children to grow, which can only come when a woman has been able to grow herself, too.

When a marriage doesn't work out, sometimes a father wants and needs to continue his growing by caring for children. Can we feel just as good about the woman who lets him do this and has the courage to know that her growing and care for her children can best be accomplished by getting out on her own? Men and women with that ability to be different serve us all. They have taken on the unconventional and therefore difficult roles proposed by Chodorow. Their children will grow up around men who take a major part in childcare, and women who have a strong sense of self and a legitimate sphere of control.

We can all help by supporting people who have the courage to choose an unconventional road. Then we, too, can understand what a giant step has been taken when a woman who does not have custody of her children can say:

> Now I find that when I talk to people they don't look at me weirdly and assume I've done a terrible thing. The children are doing well with their father and I see them regularly. I know I'm a better parent than I was when I lived at home. There are still painful times, of course, but I'm proud of what I've been able to do. I have learned I can depend on myself and I have exciting plans for the future. Because I feel good about myself, and not defensive anymore, I guess that feeling gets across to the people I meet.
>
> If a marriage breaks up there is no safe and easy path to happiness. But I want to encourage more women to realize that they can live on their own, that their children can

be well cared for by their father, and that when they need, as I did, a chance to find space for themselves they will be more responsible mothers in the long run when they realize that caring for others is meaningless if they cannot care for themselves, also.

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THE VISITING FATHER

Harry Keshet

Today, I'm going to talk about the visiting father. When I first started to talk with people about this conference, and included the visiting parent as a major part of the conference, many of my colleagues said, "Is there anything new about the visiting parent that we don't already know?" I began to think about their questions and concluded that the visiting parent is the least known parental situation. We often make assumptions about the visiting parent, and Mary Johnson's paper was very good at pointing out some of those assumptions. The visiting parent role, particularly for men, is probably the most extensive in terms of numbers of all post-divorce family roles. About 20% of the families in the United States today are classified as single-parent families. That suggests a very high number of visiting parents. If you consider the people who are separated and not divorced yet, there are additional numbers of visiting parents.

There are two major orientations towards the visiting role. The most prevalent orientation is the "disengagement" orientation. Here, the visiting parent is expected to disengage from the family. Divorce means failure, and if you failed at your marriage, it is assumed that you failed as a parent. A second assumption is that one parental environment is better than two. It is thought that more than one parental environment may be difficult and emotionally dangerous for the child. This view also assumes continued relational conflict between divorcing spouses. The assumption seems to be, "If you couldn't get along in a marriage, how would you possibly get along rearing a child after divorce?"

Thus the expectation that one parent should disengage.

In contrast to these views, recent research findings indicate that children do best socially and emotionally after divorce when there is a cooperative effort by parents in caring for their children. Bob Weiss was talking about the many, many things that single parents face particularly when there isn't the involvement of the visiting parent. Emphasizing the importance of cooperation between parents, the "engagement" orientation to the visiting parent views divorce as the restructuring of the family. The family continues through the relationships between the parents and the child, and the parents' relationship concerning the child. If we agree with the engagement theory, we must learn how to work with the restructured family and the new involvements among the visiting parent, the child, and the ex-spouse. We need to learn how to work with them and how to support the transition to a new post-divorce family form implied by the engagement orientation.

I want to say a few things about how the visiting role was experienced by men who were engaged in the lives of their children. They reported many difficulties. Schools frequently make it very difficult for men in the visiting role. Often I think not covertly, information about children's school performance was very difficult to get, and schools did not attempt to connect the visiting parent, male or female, with what was going on in the school for or about their child. The school situation was notable for its lack of information for the visiting parent, and this was frequently interpreted as lack of welcome. For example, one principal told a visiting father that he could not visit the school or talk with his child's teacher. (This happened just last year.) Fathers reported that many doctors, lawyers, and judges really didn't seem to appreciate their difficulties as the visiting parent. They didn't encourage the fathers to seek visitation rights or to continue to connect with their children after divorce. Lawyers, I think, are probably the most influential professionals in the divorcing situation, and the idea of encouraging visitation is foreign to many of them. Of 127

men in my study, only a few were encouraged by their lawyers to have visitation that was clear and structured and worked out in writing. Many of them were discouraged. They were asked, "What's wrong with you? Why do you want so much involvement? You're only going to get into conflict with your wife. Don't do that." I think we at least have to begin with lawyers to help them understand that there really is another model.

Most visiting fathers have to deal with three main issues about their role. One of the issues is fear of loss of the child, or fear that they will lose the relationship with the child after divorce. The ex-spouse is seen as having the power over the children. Fathers experience this power as having the support of the legal profession. The second major issue for men is parental impact. "How can I as a visiting parent have an impact on the social and emotional growth of my child when I don't see him or her very often? How can I influence my child's development if I only see the child every other weekend?" The last issue involves role ambiguity. "What is the role of the visiting parent? What is it that I'm supposed to do? How am I supposed to do it?" These issues are interrelated.

Fear of loss is related to the ex-spouse's perceived greater power in the courts. The custodial parent has greater power and can erode the father-child tie. The perception of the ex-spouse is usually fused. When the father looks upon his ex-spouse as being a poor wife, he also sees her as a poor parent. This fuels the conflict and increases the father's feelings of powerlessness. The role of the professional is to break through this fusion and to help each parent see the other as different in these two areas. One can be a poor spouse and a decent parent. Ex-spouses who successfully and positively co-parent are those who can differentiate between the spouse role and the parent role. When differentiation takes place, then cooperation is possible. Bob Weiss spoke about acceptance of the divorce situation, acceptance that the divorce has taken place and that you have been at fault sometimes as well as your wife or husband. Achieving this acceptance can also help to diffuse the conflict between the ex-

spouses, so that cooperative parenting can continue.

There are other conflict-reducing strategies that help reduce the visiting father's sense of powerlessness. Where do arguments take place between ex-spouses in a visiting situation? If you look carefully, you will find they often take place at the door of the ex-spouse's home. One of the ways in which we help parents deal with that is to tell them, "Just deliver the child; don't talk. Don't talk about the check, don't talk about personal difficulties, don't talk about what you forgot, just talk, if you have to, about what the child experienced during the visit that is necessary to share." This procedure helps to reduce some of the conflict by helping the couple avoid communication at a time and setting that is likely to be difficult. Reciprocity is a factor in helping this couple differentiate between the roles of spouse and parent. When a father takes a child for longer periods of time at the request of his ex-spouse, the father has a right to expect that there is going to be reciprocity from the mother. We have found that when reciprocity develops between ex-spouses, trust increases. As trust increases, fear of loss of the children decreases and powerlessness also begins to change. There is a new structure that begins to emerge based on positive exchanges.

The issue of the visiting father's impact on his child's development is an area with many unknowns. We don't know too much about what is necessary in a visiting relationship to have impact, and what I'm going to say reflects my thinking and experience, rather than anything that is strongly established in data. It's reasonable for visiting fathers to assume that their impact on their children's development will bear some proportion to the amount of time they spend with their children. And this becomes an area of concern, when that time is limited to every other weekend, as it is for many fathers. How is that time used? I spoke with visiting fathers of young children, ages four to eight. One typical pattern is for the visiting time to be extremely intense. I asked the fathers about spending time alone and spending time with other people, having

the children play by themselves, etc. Visiting fathers rarely involve other people within that visitation time, so it's a period of high intensity. Additionally, it's not a time for just being together. It's a time when fathers are doing with their children - a lot of doing. Their house is not set up for child care, so they often go out. They take them to recreational facilities. They take them to restaurants. There isn't much loose time when kids and fathers just hang out together. I don't know what impact this pattern has on child development. We'll have to see over time what that does.

There are other patterns that occur with increases in the visiting time. The more time fathers spend with children, the more their role changes to include many other functions. When you look at visiting fathers who spend at least a day a week with the child, you find a broader range of ways of spending time: just being around the house, helping with housework, going shopping, visits to child-serving institutions such as medical care and dental care. The increase in time together seems to allow for a relaxation of the high-intensity pattern that characterizes the every-other-weekend visiting father.

The final major issue for visiting fathers is role ambiguity. I think about this in terms of a concept I've used called "parental consciousness." This concept aids in understanding what is necessary for impact in the role. The first part of parental consciousness is accessibility. How accessible are the child and father to each other? Men are usually not socialized to be accessible to their children. The most important time requirement for men is defined as work time when they don't have to interact with children or other family members. So when fathers begin to become accessible to children, at work through the telephone or are able to take off work time to be with their children, a major change has occurred. For the visiting fathers in my study, the major change in parental consciousness was accessibility.

A second aspect of parental consciousness is availability. Parenting is not just being accessible. It also means being able to spend time and to talk,

and do things together. Availability means being able to focus on the interaction between father and child. The more time fathers spend with children, the more available they are for interaction. The last aspect of parental consciousness is responsiveness. Parenting requires not only being available for interaction with children, it also means being able to know the child and anticipate the child's needs in a deeper way. Responsiveness is also affected by time. I find that when fathers spend more time with their children, they're able to exhibit this responsive behavior more frequently than men who visit for less time.

The last and concluding remark I want to make is that even for those fathers who are with their children the least amount, that is, visiting every other weekend, the relationship with their children is very meaningful to them. They describe that relationship as being an experience that opened their hearts and their feelings towards another human being - to their child. And as for getting to that place, they describe the process as one of growth. So the visiting relationship is not good only for children; it can also be very good for the father - parent.

THE FAMILY FORUM:
A FORM OF THERAPY FOR FAMILIES OF DIVORCE

Richard Chasin

From the point of view of family therapy, a couple with children are a family to one another even after divorce. As long as neither parent has died or deserted, both parents continue to have a family relationship after divorce because each one has a critical relationship with the same children and because the nature of the post-divorce relationship between the parents profoundly affects the life of these children. If the relationship between divorced parents is constructive then it helps their children to live and grow well. If it is destructive then it impedes the development and well-being of the children.

When I began to treat divorcing or divorced couples, I made the assumption that many of the principles and methods of family and couple therapy would be applicable to "divorce therapy." While this assumption is true, there are few family situations where dysfunctional behavior is as mystifying and intransigent as in divorced couples.

In practice people are not referred for "divorce therapy." They may come because a child is symptomatic during or after divorce. Often, they come because the divorcing or divorced couple wants advice about how to meet the needs of their children. Sometimes they come because the couple would like to use a therapist to help them settle differences about custody and divorce. Whatever they come for, I frequently offer them something which I think of as divorce therapy (although I will rarely use that term in talking with clients).

I would like to sketch out for you what this divorce therapy looks like. I need to confess that even though I have had some gratifying results with it I am not satisfied. There are still too many problems I do not understand and too many situations which I do not know how to handle humanely and efficiently.

Once it appears to me that a family could benefit from divorce therapy, I suggest that the splitting or split couple work together in what I call a "family forum." Such a forum meets on a regular basis. The frequency and the length of the meetings depend on the needs of the situation. In acutely disorganized and distressed situations, there may be weekly forum meetings each lasting 2½ hours. When there is much order and co-operation and when only minor issues are at stake, the forum might meet only once a year.

Whatever the circumstances, when a couple or ex-couple contracts to use this forum they agree that the forum will be heavily controlled by the therapist. While everyone's opinion is sought on every major issue, the couple agrees that the therapist will decide the frequency, the time, and the length of every meeting, the order of agenda items, the rules that govern forum discussions and which family members are present for each phase of each forum meeting. The couple is informed that the therapist has no legal authority over the conduct of the family outside the forum, but that the therapist's recommendations should be taken seriously if the forum is to work.

In preparation for the first forum meeting the divorcing or divorced parents are seen separately and the contract is affirmed. (Any new spouse is usually invited to that preparatory meeting.) In the first forum meeting itself only the divorced (or divorcing) parents come. I begin by stating my conviction that the forum can be effective only if it is experienced as a safe place and that this sense of safety derives from adherence to the contract, especially to co-operation with the forum discussion rules. I outline these

rules as follows:

In the forum meetings:

1. People shall protect each other's physical safety; thus no violence.

2. No one will be forced to anwer any questions. If anyone refuses to answer a question, he/she will not be required to give the reason for the refusal.

3. The only person who has the right to interrupt is the therapist. The therapist is likely to interrupt if the speaker is saying anything which the therapist believes will impair the constructive atmosphere of the meeting. Therefore, the therapist may well interrupt when a family member monopolizes the floor, talks off the subject, assesses blame, speaks for others or attributes destructive intentions and sentiments to others.

While these rules may appear extremely restrictive they are often necessary if the family is to have an experience other than a few more rounds of the attack-and-defend game which has been hurting and hampering them. Even with these rules in force, the past injuries the couple has inflicted on one another have often been so painful that the air of the first meeting is thick with anxiety, a massively conditioned response to the presence of an individual who has caused injury.

In more than one open meeting I have had to guide the couple through formal desensitization in order to diminish their anxiety to the point where they did not feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by it. This desensitization is sometimes done systematically by helping people to become relaxed and then by helping them to maintain that state of relaxation as they become increasingly aware of the individual in the room who tends to stimulate their anxiety. Another device which serves to diminish conditioned anxiety is to have them discuss neutral or pleasant subjects. Often each knows little about the struggles and successes which do not affect the other. Finally role reversing may help them to experience the more human, less terrifying side of one another.

It may take more than one meeting for the forum to feel safe. Once that state is achieved, other people can be invited to it and issues of increasing heat and delicacy can be taken up in a constructive manner. When discussions break down, all manners of therapeutic devices may be necessary to get them back on track. Even when talks go well, the therapist must remember that the family members are still in the grips of the habits or systems that led them to need this therapy. Therefore, even when a new path has been successfully negotiated efforts must be made to ensure compliance. For example, the therapist may wish to show each family member the way in which the solution reflects his/her deepest values.

Seven years and twenty families later I am glad to report that all the families still are working with me. I see only rarely the cases which were easy from the start. In about half of the harder cases there are now only occasional meetings, the divorced parents having found a way to create a forum without me. I struggle on with the rest of the hard ones. While I am satisfied with much of the method and its results, I am not at all pleased with some aspects of the forum approach. For one thing these families are crisis-prone and I have yet to discover a way to be responsive to dangerous emergencies without being subject between meetings to an endless flood of phone calls about matters which only <u>feel</u> urgent.

To preserve my own sanity I often restrict all communications with me to the forum meeting. The family may write me or call my assistant if they feel the need to convey information between meetings. In this way I can be aware of the occasional matters which may require action between meetings.

One of the most gratifying aspects of divorce therapy is its impact on the children. Before the children become part of the forum meetings I generally meet alone with them. Most often I see them both separately and as a sibling group. I explain to them the contract and the forum meeting rules and give

them an opportunity to tell me anything they wish. I let them know that I would like to be able to share what I learn from them with their parents and I also say that I do honor requests for confidentiality.

When they attend their first forum meeting with their parents they are usually conspicuously relieved at the atmosphere of civility and safety which pervades the room. They find themselves able to speak more freely than they imagined they would and sometimes contribute creatively to the problem-solving efforts of the family.

The least gratifying aspects of this work arise from factors which make any kind of family therapy difficult. A family with deeply entrenched disabling patterns populated by borderline, impulsive, and narcissistic individuals is no easier to work with after divorce than when a family is intact. In fact, it may be harder after divorce. After divorce, people are more likely to say or do anything to maintain self-esteem no matter how problematic that behavior may be for the rest of the family. Another problem in divorce therapy is the rekindling of warm feelings between the divorced parents. If neither is re-married their co-operation occasionally tempts them to try intimacy again. The attempts are rare, brief and abortive, but nonetheless quite painful. If they are re-married co-operation between divorced parents can be threatening to new spouses and may cause stress in the step-families. For that reason it is important to give new spouses as much access to the forum as possible.

Through the family forum most divorced couples come to act as though they had joint custody, whether they do or not. I believe that parents who do have joint custody should have some such forum available to them for problems in their co-parenting. As with many other situations in the mental health field, those who need the least gain the most. Compared with other divorced parents, those with joint custody least need divorce therapy but tend to profit from it more richly, painlessly, and efficiently.

JOINT CUSTODY

Harry Keshet

The development of joint custody is a historical process. Let me briefly summarize some of the social and political changes that have led to joint custody. In our early history, American fathers always received custody of their children, because men had legal rights to their offspring. This began to change about 1856 with the "tender years" doctrine, which came to us from England. The mother's rights to her children became recognized; mothers were seen as being particularly important in the lives of young children. At the turn of the 20th century, the father as visiting parent and mother as custodial parent became prevalent. This change was related to changes in the political and economic structure of the country. It reflected new ideas and theories about psychology, child development, and parenting. What we see currently, is a new development towards another kind of system, or at least another option, called joint custody, where both parents are seen as contributors to the rearing of their children after divorce. In about twenty states, joint custody is a legal category. Presently in Massachusetts, a judge may grant joint custody, but it is not a category of custody that has been created by law.

What is joint custody? The main feature of joint custody is joint decision-making. This means that both parents have the right and responsibility to continue to parent by making decisions about their child. These decisions usually fall in three areas. The first is education: both parents participate in making decisions about how and where the child is to be educated. The second area is medical: both parents have the right and responsibility for making medical and

dental decisions that affect the child. The third area has to deal with what kind of religious training the child will receive. These decisional areas are the backbone of joint custody.

The notion of rights and responsibilities is a major change from sole custody. In joint custody, both parents maintain the right and the responsibility to make decisions about their children after divorce. By contrast, when you get divorced and are not a custodial parent, you lose that right. It is the court that decides who has the right to rear and make parental decisions. The sharing of power under joint custody raises eyebrows. How can people who are getting divorced really make joint decisions about how their children shall be raised? What kind of information do they need? What happens if they disagree? How do they resolve conflicts? We'll look at some of these issues shortly.

The second aspect of joint custody is where the children shall reside. Do they live with both parents half the time? Do they visit? Do they have to live in the same neighborhood? There isn't any set rule for answering these questions. I have worked out joint custody situations with parents who live in the same community and with parents who live across the country. Where children live is not as important as the decision-making aspect of joint custody. I will focus the rest of my remarks on those situations where joint custody is combined with shared custody. Shared custody means that each of the ex-spouses is responsible for rearing the child approximately half the time. It doesn't have to be half time. You can be responsible for your child every other weekend and still have joint custody, but the actual sharing of physical custody on a half-time basis was a part of joint custody that I studied. Fathers in our sample had two kinds of situations. They were responsible for their children for half of the week (that's two or three days a week), usually over the weekend, or they had the children every other week. In the latter case, the child would be with the father one week and with the mother the next. Under either of these schemes, for half the time each was a single parent with all the prob-

lems and benefits that single parenting entails. The other half of the time, the parent was without children totally. Some people think that joint custody and this kind of shared parenting resolves the inequities of sole custody. Yet this form of joint custody can be difficult for parents. They have to go through many and frequent transitions when children are with them and when they are alone. It's also hard for the children. In the beginning there are major adjustments for the whole family. For example, the child who is about to go to the father's house may be upset and act out for half an hour before leaving the mother's home. The mother may get upset because the child is getting upset, and she may also be trying to get the child's things ready for the father. When the father comes, he may be upset because he's getting ready to take the child. It may take two or three hours before everything settles down. Any of these transitions can be difficult: being with one parent or being with the other parent; being without a child or being with a child.

How joint custody with shared physical custody can work effectively was one of the major interests of my research. One of the telling characteristics of the group of men who had this form of joint custody was that they were able to do what the visiting fathers were not able to do: separate the roles of parent and spouse. They were able to do this in a number of ways. One was to develop a visiting schedule where they did not have much face-to-face contact with their ex-spouse. They picked the child up at school rather than at the home. They returned the child to the home, but that was usually the only face-to-face contact they had with the ex-spouse. These fathers did not contact or did not talk frequently to their former spouse about non-parenting issues. This is a very significant way of separating out the two roles. They didn't talk frequently about careers or work. They didn't talk frequently about what happened in their former marriage. This enabled them to separate out significant areas of the role of spouse, and thereby reduce potential conflict. The other way of making this custody work well was that they had what I call a

"living document for divorce." It provides for "structured flexibility." In the case of the joint/shared custody situation, the divorce document specifies what is to be expected of each parent in highly detailed terms. This specificity is needed particularly in the beginning of the separation. For example, the document may state that the father will have the child between Thursday and Sunday evenings. If the child is going to be late on Sunday evening, the father will call the child's mother. The document specifies where the children will spend holidays and vacations. The agreement also has a mechanism for dealing with conflicts and changes. When something in the agreement has to be changed or where decisional conflicts occur, the parents agree that they will go to a person or institution for mediation of their differences. This is very important. It means that parents don't have to go to court every time they have a disagreement. This provision allows for post-divorce family changes to be settled structurally. A static document that doesn't have any way for building in change leads to conflict and cannot help the family meet post-divorce crises effectively. In our experience, co-parenting conflicts were most frequent in the first years following a divorce. After successfully using the mediation provision, ex-spouses made their own decisions and they didn't need to use mediation so frequently. It's a structure that helps parents get through the most difficult periods of family transition. Later they don't need it; if they do need it, it's still there to be used.

Another way of reducing conflict is through the use of the telephone as opposed to face-to-face contact. I've had men say to me, "I would really rather my ex-wife hang up on me than slam the door in my face. It just feels better." "If I don't want her hassling me any more, when she really starts using the language that I can't stand, I hang up and it's wonderful. I don't have to deal with her any more around that issue... Then we call back and the tension is reduced." Another effective use of the telephone is the call hour. Some of the joint custody parents in our study agreed, for example, that on

Tuesdays at 2:00 in the afternoon when both of them had a break, if they had a parenting issue they would call the other parent. Both parents agreed to make themselves available, and they would not say, "I don't want to talk to you." Fathers using this mechanism reported talking mostly about the kids. This seemed to keep information and support flowing in a limited way between households. It is important to note that simultaneously over the years, the two parents developed separate single parent support networks. This meant that they did not have to go to each other for short-term babysitting, or minor advice. It was only when they couldn't find someone to give needed assistance for parenting needs that they would go to the other parent.

What do we do as counselors, as teachers, and as lawyers in working with joint custody situations? How can we start doing something that supports these families? First, I think it is important to understand that children do better when there is cooperation between parents. We need to let go of some of our biases that say that a multi-household situation is going to be detrimental. I think we have to look at each situation and make sure that it is not going to be detrimental, rather than assume that it's going to be detrimental to begin with. Secondly, the role of mediator is an essential new role for many professions. It implies being able to work with the post-divorce family, to understand that the family unit changes, and that there will be stuck points along the way. Lastly, the schools are critical arenas for supporting both parents by giving them information about their children, by letting them know what's happening in the school, by inviting them to conferences, by learning to deal with some of the difficulties with parents who are divorced, and eventually by saying, "I can do it, I can work with these parents, even though there is some conflict." These changes in the thinking of professionals require a review of personal biases and attitudes. They also suggest that we should re-examine some of the institutional structures that limit the options for post-divorce custody arrangements and that may not be appropriate for many divorcing parents.

THE MINIFAMILY IN THE STEPFAMILY

Jamie Kelem Keshet

Remarriage is supposed to be the happy ending to the difficulties following divorce. Unfortunately, it's not always happy. Just as many second marriages as first marriages end in divorce -- 44% in the first five years. And remarriage is not the end of uncertainty and transition.

Neither reconstitution nor blending seem to me apt metaphors for the stepfamily. The analogy which seems most suitable to me is playdough. My little boy gets new playdough in four distinct and bright colors. He doesn't usually mush them all up right away. At first, the green gets some orange around the edges; the yellow has a lump of green in it. The next time he plays, the marbled effect goes further into the center of the lump of playdough, and the part that is only one color gets smaller and smaller. After much loving play and handling, the playdough is one big lump of many colors, mixed together so thoroughly that it would be impossible to sort them out, and yet you can still see the different colors clearly. This is what a stepfamily looks like to me.

My goal for a stepfamily is not to create a new nuclear family. It is to work with the stepfamily members to create a new family form which works for them. This is very important. There is no model for a happy stepfamily. It is up to us to learn from the people who are getting remarried and from their children what kind of family system can be functional and give people both space and intimacy, autonomy and security.

I am going to focus on one aspect of the stepfamily today: that step-

families are composed primarily not of individuals but of subsystems or minifamilies. The minifamilies, themselves, have been discussed by the previous speakers. The single parent family is a minifamily; it is definitely a family and yet its members are aware (at least in the beginning) of its smallness -- the fact that it has been reduced from a nuclear family. The minifamilies which can comprise the stepfamily are: the single parent family, the visiting parent family, and the newly married couple (this is the one unit which has not been discussed here). The formerly married couples also function as subsystems of the stepfamily system. We don't usually think of one's former wife or husband as a member of the remarriage, but their input is very important and their presence is felt strongly.

We have heard from other speakers here today that each of these units or minifamilies goes through a complex process following a divorce. The median time between first and second marriages is three years, so half the remarriages take place when these minifamily units have had three years or more to solidify into new patterns. And of the remaining half most have had more than a year to do so. This is where the lumps of playdough get some of their coloring. The new minifamilies acquire their own ways of doing things, and their distinct identities. At the time of remarriage, the new stepfamily household does not consist merely of a collection of adults and children ready to form a new family; it is comprised of several distinct subsystems with histories and loyalties of their own. This is exactly what makes the stepfamily different from a nuclear family and more challenging to work with.

Identifying the members of the minifamily continues after the remarriage in obvious and subtle ways. Last name is an important way this is done. In fact, many remarrying mothers do not change their last names to that of their second husband, but retain the last name of their first marriage because they want to have the same last name as their children. Minifamily members also

share a history, a host of memories which others in the household do not share and a history which has shaped their tastes and habits. For example, a woman who had spent a year in Mexico with her first husband and children learned to cook many Mexican dishes which she and her children enjoyed. When she cooked these meals in her second marriage, her new husband tolerated them and his children ate peanut butter sandwiches which they made themselves. The membership of the former single parent unit was clearly delineated by looking at the plates on the dinner table. (This is a good example because many of the conflicts in stepfamilies center around food, eating habits and table manners.)

Boundaries are the invisible (and sometimes visible) lines which separate people from each other and which separate subsystems of a family from each other. People on one side of a boundary have access to information, nurturance, or behaviors that people on the other side don't. Boundaries maintain distances. For example, ten-year-old "John" has always been called "J.J." by his immediate family. One day his stepmother affectionately called him "J.J." and he angrily replied "You call me John." He was both defining her as not a family member and keeping up a strong boundary between them. Here is a different example of a child of the same age who broke through a boundary. The children in the minifamily headed by "Marge" had special Christmas stockings which had been knit by their grandmother. When "Joshua" was going to spend his first Christmas with his father and Marge in their new home, Marge offered to knit him a stocking like those her children had. Although Joshua had not celebrated Christmas before since his mother was Jewish and he was too old to believe in Santa Claus, he accepted Marge's offer and proudly hung his stocking beside those of his stepsister and brother. Marge, in this case, was offering Joshua a sign of membership in her minifamily and he was accepting. Both of them were crossing the boundary between them. Interactions such as these, which may seem like minor parts of life between people in stepfamilies, are

steeped with meaning. That's an important point when working with stepfamilies; when things that seem trivial become major it is because they mean "I belong" or "I am accepted" or "my child is not accepted." Membership and its definition through minifamily boundaries is a key issue which is not completely resolved for years.

The minifamily can also retain their integrity through loyalty and alliances. Patty Green, Janet Green, and Linda Jackson (stepsisters) are deciding where the family will go for ice cream. Patty is strongly in favor of Friendly's; her stepsister Linda insists on Brigham's. Janet really doesn't care; she wants a coke and french fries, but she knows there'll be a big price to pay later on if she doesn't support her sister. This is loyalty to the minifamily. In their play, Linda often feels that Patty and Janet form an alliance against her. It is not because they dislike her. They are honoring the bond which they have had for six years, whereas they have lived with Linda for only six months.

I've given some brief information about membership in minifamilies, minifamily boundaries and minifamily loyalties. Let's see how these concepts help us to understand life in the stepfamily. Let's take the examples of the two stepsons, John and Joshua. These boys are about the same age, spend similar amounts of time in the stepfamily home and have known their stepmothers for about the same amount of time. Why the difference in behavior? Without looking at the minifamily structures we might say John is closed, cold, inflexible, rigid and Joshua is warm, friendly and open to new experiences. Or we might say that John's stepmother is pushy, callous, intrusive and Joshua's stepmother is giving, generous, and loving. It's very easy for stepfamily members and professionals, alike, to make these judgments. Yet we don't know enough about the subsystems. Does John feel disloyal to his biological mother, the first one to call him "J.J.," if he lets his stepmother use this term? Is he trying to hold onto some of the special things he remembers from the time

his parents were married? We don't know. And the same for Joshua. Is he breaking a rule of his mother's minifamily by celebrating Christmas? Will his behavior lead to a fight between his parents and a court order that Joshua spend all future December vacations with his mother only? Again, we don't know.

One of the difficulties in stepfamilies is that most people in the family belong to more than one minifamily. So loyalty, to one minifamily, may be problematic for the other when there is a conflict. A parent who is a member of two minifamilies is often caught in this kind of conflict. In fact, although a lot of attention has been given to the difficult role of the stepparent, I find that the role of the biological parent living with a stepparent is just as difficult.

Let's look at our friend Joshua when he's with his mom, Sarah, and her new husband, Ed, who is childless. On the weekends when Joshua is with is Dad, Sarah and Ed have the freedom from child care to put a lot of energy into their new marriage. They frequently stay out late, go away for weekends on the spur of the moment, and stay in bed till noon on Sundays, a real treat for Sarah after ten years of motherhood and a nice but expected lifestyle for Ed who has been a bachelor. Prior to Sarah's meeting Ed, she had spent three years as a working, single mother, feeling guilty both about her son's "broken home" and about her fulltime job which kept him away from her. On those weekends when Joshua stayed with her, she treated him royally. She did a minimum of chores, took Joshua to special places or stayed home and played with him, helped him do models, and entertained his friends. She let him miss his regular bedtime and stay up, sitting on her bed watching TV till 10 or 11 on the weekend nights. In fact, Sarah's behavior is quite consistent; she values intense and intimate relationships and has the capacity and energy to make that kind of relationship work whether it's with her son or her husband. But what happens now on those week-

ends when Joshua is with her and so is her husband Ed? There is sure to be a fight. It may go something like this: Joshua asks if he can stay up to watch a World War II movie which won't be over until 10:30. Sarah says yes, of course. Ed says angrily that she is spoiling the boy and acts huffy to Joshua for the rest of the day. He complains that Sarah doesn't care about him anymore. Joshua privately tells his mother that his stepfather is too strict. On the individual level we might see an over-indulgent mother, a strict stepfather or a childish husband, and a child who is manipulative and spoiled.

What is happening on the minifamily level? Joshua is trying to maintain patterns of behavior which he and his mother shared in their minifamily before her remarriage. Although staying up late to watch TV by himself in the living room is different from watching with his mom in her room (now off limits much of the time since it's also Ed's room), it is a modification of a familiar and happy family ritual. Sarah, as a member of this same minifamily, honors his continuation of the ritual although she may no longer join him. She can't understand why Ed, usually so liberal and open, is so strict about bedtimes.

Ed's loyalty, on the other hand, is to the couple relationship, the only minifamily in which he is a member. He, too, is attempting to continue and honor a ritual of his subsystem, the ritual of cozy, grown-up time on weekend evenings. Ed's wanting Joshua to go to bed on time is not because he cares about bedtimes; it is his way of maintaining the boundary of the couple system. His disagreement with Sarah is not really about Joshua; he can't understand why his wife, who has taught him so much about intimacy, is abandoning the marital subsystem. Does her switch in loyalties when Joshua is present negate her intense involvement when her son is not there?

When Sarah and Ed argue about Joshua, she is arguing from her membership in the parent-child minifamily and Ed from the couple minifamily. He

does not have membership in the minifamily with Joshua and does not have the power to determine Joshua's rules. Therefore, the argument cannot be resolved on the level of what time should the boy go to bed. Ed's real concerns about the marital minifamily (How much time do we have together?) are not being addressed by Sarah, because she is arguing as Joshua's mother. As long as they remain in these two different subsystems, their argument will go on long beyond the time that Joshua turns off the TV and goes to sleep.

A fight such as this one can escalate into serious marital problems or into problems which involve Joshua and even Joshua's father. What is necessary to resolve these issues? How can we use the structure of the minifamilies in this case?

First of all, Sarah and Ed must learn to address each other as partners in the marital minifamily. The issue for this subsystem is commitment. Ed is questioning Sarah's commitment because of her behavior towards Joshua and her reluctance to set up boundaries around the couple subsystem. If Sarah can, as Ed's wife, express her commitment, she may then be able to share with him her feelings that arise within the parent-child subsystem which interfere with her intimacy with Ed. He is more likely to listen to his wife telling him she has a need to vary the routine on the weekends that Joshua is there, than he is to listen to Joshua's mother feeling sorry for her son. With better communication, Sarah and Ed can probably compromise about the boundary for the couple system. Then, Sarah will be able to enforce an agreed upon bedtime for Joshua.

Within the parent-child subsystem, the issues are separation of mother and child and willingness to change the subsystem. Josh and his mother need to work out some new patterns of connecting with each other which continue to express their caring, but which also allow each of them more autonomy -- Sarah for her relationship with Ed, and Joshua for friends his own age. Ed's entrance into the family, in fact, pushes the mother and son to differentiate.

This is an important function he serves as a stepfather. From his position outside the parent-child minifamily, he helps that minifamily to develop positively by being a catalyst of change. In this case, the change will aid both subsystems, (i.e., a boundary which excludes Joshua and is developmentally appropriate for his age). The late night TV can then become an activity which occasionally all three family members share; one Josh sometimes does alone in his room, as a privilege which comes with his increased age; or even sometimes as an activity which Sarah and Josh share. It is important for Sarah to be able to tell Ed, "I want this time with Joshua." Otherwise he imagines her at Joshua's beck and call. It is also important for her to tell Joshua, "Take the TV to your room and get ready for bed before you watch, because I want to spend some time with Ed." Then Joshua doesn't imagine that his stepfather is stealing his mother away. When Sarah can become clearer with both her son and her husband, they will be freer to break down the boundaries between them and become friends.

It is very easy for stepchildren, stepparents, or ex-spouses to be the source of endless arguments, most of them unresolved, which cover up the real issues concerning family members. Once the argument is no longer about Joshua, for example, Sarah and Ed may find that they are actually having a fight about intimacy, sex, or space from each other. Those are important fights for their development as a couple. Often the fight about stepchildren postpones the decision about the couple having children of their own. Similarly, a discussion between Sarah and Joshua about whether or not Ed is too strict does not resolve their issues about time together and apart from each other.

I would like to say just a little bit about the subsystem of the childless adult, like Ed, who becomes a stepparent. He or she usually brings his or her own expectations and sometimes hidden agendas to the new role. Women seem to measure their stepparenting performace by how quickly and thoroughly they can

love, nurture and care for their stepchildren. Men expect themselves to provide discipline, guidance and strength for their stepsons and daughters. Although the biological parent may actually want the new spouse to provide some of these traditional behaviors of the opposite sex, the children are not usually open to the immediate acceptance of a new adult in any role. For example, a mother of two teenage boys may want her new husband to provide discipline for her sons, but the boys themselves will resist his authority. It usually works out better if her husband's initial assistance lies in giving feedback and support to his wife in her disciplining of the children. If his help enables the parent-child subsystem to function better, it will actually be easier for the children to accept him. The first step in working with stepfamilies is not, as so many remarried couples assume, to break down the boundaries and create one big, happy family. It is more often to smooth the functioning of particular minifamilies who are having difficulties, and then to create new alliances across old boundary lines.

In summary, an understanding of the stepfamily which emphasizes the importance of the subsystems or minifamilies is helpful to professionals in working with stepfamilies. First of all, it provides a clear reason why stepfamilies are not the same as nuclear families and do not become the same as nuclear families. The strength of the minifamilies requires changing boundaries and family memberships over a long period of time and slowly. Looking at the minifamily level can explain behavior which is otherwise considered strange or negative (such as "you call me John"). The conflict of a parent or child who is a member of two conflicting subsystems can be understood when we recognize the strength of the minifamily units and the importance of belonging to each of them. Moreover, the sense of abandonment and exclusion felt by childless stepparents can be seen not as immature or insecure behavior, but as the feeling that comes from being in only one subsystem. An analysis based on subsystems

provides guidelines for diagnosing the complex difficulties which stepfamilies present. It provides a check on the functioning of each of the subsystems and then on the functioning of the system as a whole. A minifamily with unresolved issues from the past or in the present can stand in the way of the well-being of the entire stepfamily. For this reason, it is sometimes important to treat subsystem difficulties before treating the entire stepfamily. Understanding the clear distinctions between subsystems is also helpful in teach stepfamily members how to negotiate the differences between subsystems and how to work out ways of sharing resources. I must also stress the importance of the couple subsystem. This is the unit which has initiated the formation of this complex new system. It is also the newest and most fragile unit of all. Therefore, the couple need time and space to strengthen their relationship.

A stepfamily, particularly one in which there are no new children born to the couple, is a new family form. Instead of a couple raising their common children, we have a couple raising children who have been born to one of the parents, but with other partners. Yet, no one would deny that they comprise a family. To create a stepfamily that works, requires a sensitivity to the past, a willingness of family members to recognize each other as they are, and a willingness to experience the caring and love which human beings are capable of giving to each other, regardless of their genetic ties.